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14) 9th International Astra Film Festival, Sibiu, 22-28 October 2007
By Colette Piault (piault.c@club-internet.fr)

The Romanian city Sibiu, that since 1991 has been the host of The Astra Film Festival, was this year selected to be the European Capital of Culture. This circumstance boosted The 9th Astra Film Festival and turned this already important documentary film festival into a feast with a lot of attendants - on some evenings more than one thousand, and with many young people during the whole week. Some people said it was probably the largest in Eastern Europe: That is probably true and I even wonder if there is any other Documentary Film festival in Europe able to gather so many people.

I had already been to Sibiu in 1996, on the Jury of the 3rd Astra Film Festival. At that time, it was a modest anthropological film festival with a very nice convivial atmosphere where we were happy to discover films from Eastern Europe and mainly from Romania.

This year it was an impressively large international Feast, perfectly presented by the organisers. There were fifteen permanent staff people – attached to Astra Film - working for the festival and

one hundred and twenty volunteers, all speaking a fluent English. That gives an idea of the dimension of the festival.

The location was the House of Culture, formerly belonging to the Workers Unions. There were two large rooms for film projections, with about 800 seats in one and about 400 hundred in the other. There were halls and many other rooms to meet more privately.

During the festival there were other cultural activities also going on. There was a large photo exhibition: "My Transylvania Photo Exhibit" and each afternoon live concerts: The Maramures Band, Pastoral Music from Romania, Italy and France, as Pastoralism was one of the chosen themes of the Festival. Also, the Balkanfalkafolk band making people dancing, and on the last evening a Brass Band was present to accompany all participants back through the streets as we returned from the Hall where the Awards Ceremony took place to the House of Culture. The whole atmosphere of the festival was very lively and convivial. Let me add that the arrangements for lodging, food, bar etc...were carefully thought out and made the stay very pleasant.

Astra Film Festival was supported by a dozen national and foreign cultural institutions including The Romanian Cultural Institute, the British Council, the French Embassy, etc... Sony and fifteen others mainly sponsored it. The Festival was also linked to about twenty-five Media Partners, national and foreign. It was obviously a very international meeting. The result was that nobody could ignore the Festival. There were reports shot by different television channels, and many radio stations interviewed us.

The sponsorship of Sony was most important. They had a space in the Festival to exhibit their new HD-camera and they also had space in the program to hold a public demonstration of it. Thanks to Sony, there was a self service video bar with twelve screens open from 10 AM to 11 PM, available to any participant.

As it was a Film Festival, it is time to talk about the Jury and the films. As I cannot mention or criticize all films here, and as there is another review of the Astra Film Festival in this Newsletter, I will give a very subjective view from the point of view of a jury member. There were two Juries of five members each. One had to judge "International" and "Romania" selections whilst the other was responsible for "Europe" and "Student" selection. So there were four groups of films and two awards for each group. To assign a group to a film was the only responsibility of the organizers.

I was on the jury of the "International" and "Romania" section which means that I have only seen half of the films, about thirty. And as I arrived one day late, I had to rush to fit the whole selection into three days!

I realised that it would be quite impossible to attend projections of all the thirty films, as some presentations were often overlapping, I was surprised to be told that I did not have to see the films in the theatres. I could ask for them at the video bar and see them with earphones, there, in the Hall. One member of our jury took the films into her hotel room and saw them alone on her computer.... I do not like that procedure because it seems to me that it is important for the members of a jury to integrate the reactions of the public to their judgments and also, sometimes the explanations given to spectators after the showing, when there is a debate with the filmmaker.

At the beginning, the organizers gathered the two juries to explain to us about the awards. That is an important point: when a festival makes awards to films chosen by the juries, their choices must take into consideration the Festival's intentions and purpose. That explains the overlapping between three groups of films (Romania, Europe, International) many films could have been just put as well in one group as into another. And there are films that could have received an award if they had been put in a different group. Of course, it is understandable that an award financed by the Romanian Cultural Institute was made to a film not only on Romania but also made by a Romanian filmmaker.

What I mean is that the nature and origins of the awards partly explains how the groupings were made and an orientation provided for the jury's work.

As with many festivals of documentary films nowadays, most films here were linked to television channels or strongly influenced by them. Even when not produced by television channels and never shown on the small screen, they adopted the length and the format of telecinematographic writing, hoping to be programmed one day...

For example, there was a very interesting Romanian film "The Potter from Binis" about a village traditionally inhabited by potters. The main character had a rich personality, was really very nice, clever, with a certain charm. He gave all the necessary explanations to the spectator but a voice over had been added which commented on uninteresting general matters and broke the rhythm and the charm of the story.

The filmmaker confessed that the voice over was unnecessary and that he had added it "for television". The "for television" becomes more and more an excuse for all unpleasant or unnecessary elements in films...

Incidentally, most films are produced by independent filmmakers who then put them up to television channels. So, reflecting the requirements of national televisions, some films can be more creative and reach a very good quality level. It is the case for Norway. Also, in some countries like UK, the filmmakers are so adapted to television requirements that they are skilled to make TV films however rich, documented and interesting...

As in all documentary film festivals, most films were about "The Misery of the World" and even if the films are not exceptional, the spectator travels through the worst parts of the world, gathers information and learns a lot. That is one of the richness of documentary film festivals. I will just be able here to mention some films among those that I was moved by.

It seems to me that maybe because we were in the Eastern part of Europe, there is a new theme emerging: it is the movement of populations for political or economic reasons - different from the immigration problems as seen from the West - and the situation of villages or towns now deserted, where people who stayed are only shadows wandering in an empty space. This is the case of the Norwegian film shot in Russia after the closing of a mine "Prirechnyy - The Town that no longer exists". Also, "Beyond the Forest", made by an Austrian filmmaker, describing the loneliness of those who stayed in a Transylvanian village after the recent mass migration to Germany. These two films were moving. Another film shot by two Luxembourg women filmmakers who established relationships in a Transylvanian village with two Romanian women of different backgrounds. The film, "Stam - we are staying" is a very intimate and meaningful film.

There was an ambitious film, produced by Norway and Canada, well shot which has already received many awards in festivals "On a Tightrope". The film shot in the Xinjiang Province of China, in a group of Muslim Uyghur, describes life in a government orphanage where children are trained in the traditional Uyghur tightrope walking. The shooting was exceptionally careful and skilled and the film had also the merit of conveying to us the social, political and religious context. It is a rich and important film.

There were not very many films made by anthropologists but there was one, perfectly mastered and satisfying to me entitled "Making Rain" and shot in Mozambique. It concerned at the same time a ritual and a gender conflict. It was proposed to our jury but as the other members were mainly TV producers, it did not get an award, only a mention. I am sure that such a rare film will have a long and successful life in other film festivals and will be widely shown.

There are other films that I found interesting although they were neither very inventive nor very skilled but they were efficient in providing information. A modest portrait film "Stella" caught my attention because it showed the migration of a Romanian couple in France seen from the side of the Romanians.

The two juries together had the opportunity but not the obligation, to choose an outstanding film for the Great Sibiu Award. "Cabal in Kabul", a very surprising film, with an interesting dramatic construction and an unusual theme, was chosen but I did not participate to the vote as I felt doubts about the making of that film.

I am sorry that I have limited my comments to only a few films, but anyway, as I was on a jury, I could not see more than half of the program. So, I have mentioned here the films that I liked and will remember.

Now, about being on a jury. What I usually like being a jury member is to be able to listen the others members defending films that I am not so keen about. I can open my mind and sometimes change it. It is very fruitful. In Sibiu, we had no meetings for discussion, only a final one to vote. The members of the jury came from different backgrounds. It could have been interesting if we had had enough time and several meetings to learn from each other. This was not the case. Some, who were totally involved in TV, as producers or filmmakers, explained that they chose a film according to its chance of being good enough to be broadcast on TV.

In Sibiu, this year we all knew that we had the privilege to participate in an exceptional Astra Film Festival and we wondered if in next year's gathering (maybe due to less funding!) the festival would focus more on anthropology as in its preceding sessions. Or will it be a very large Feast like this year? Who knows? Sibiu in 2007 came over as *the* European Festival for the twenty first century...

Many thanks, congratulations and a long life to Astra Film Festival!

Dr. Colette Piault
Anthropologist and Filmmaker
President of the French Visual Anthropology Association
Former Director of Research at the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research in France)

Films quoted

1. "The Potter from Binis"
Romania, Cosmin Tiglar, 27'
2. "Prirechnyy - The Town that no longer exists".
Norway, Tone Grotkjord, 52', First film
3. "Beyond the Forest",
Austria, Gerald Igor Hauzenberger, 75'
4. "Stam - we are staying"
Luxembourg, Anne Schiltz & Charlotte Grégoire, 54'
5. "On a Tightrope".
Norway/Canada, Petr Lom, 70'
6. "Stella"
France, Vanina Vignal, 77'
7. "Making Rain"
Estonia/Norway/Mozambique, Liivo Niglas & Frode Storaas, 57'
8. "Cabal in Kabul",
Belgium, Dan Alexe, 87'

15) Review of the 9th Astra International Festival of Documentary Film and Visual Anthropology, Sibiu, Romania, 22-28 October 2007.

By Alyssa Grossman (alyssa.grossman@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk)

In 1991, filmmaker and anthropologist Dumitru Budrala was appointed to establish a new Audio Visual department at the Astra Museum in Sibiu. With the Astra Film Foundation, together with the state-funded Astra Film Studio, he hoped to raise money for creating a film studio, archives, and national center of visual anthropology. Things were not easy, particularly in the beginning; equipment was scarce and there was no stable location for the office. During the first few years after the 1989 revolution, Romania's economy was so bad that many people considered such a project to be a "vanity" rather than a necessity. As Budrala noted a decade ago in *Martor: the Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review*, "[I]n 1992 in Romania, a film studio in a museum was considered to be strange and useless...With a low budget, lack of information, and a small team, this goal was a mere utopia" (1997: 133).

In this same article, Budrala reminisces about the arguments he had with his neighbors when he would stay up late at night editing films in his apartment. He recalls how for the early editions of the Astra Film Festival, he sent out hundreds of invitations to anthropology centers, institutions, and foundations around the world, but because Sibiu was just “a small town in the middle of Romania, a former communist country with no tradition in visual anthropology” (1997: 136), there was very little international interest. Teaming up with Simona Bealcovischi, Adina Vargatu, and Csilla Kato, they continued with an admirable perseverance, supporting field research and filming projects, building up an archive of documentaries, and organizing screenings of Romanian and international ethnographic films. But even after several years of such work, Budrala still wondered, “Can this experiment be regarded as the beginning of visual anthropology in Romania?” (1997: 136).

Now, nine festivals later, with the ongoing efforts of Budrala, Kato, and many other committed organizers and volunteers, the Astra Film Festival continues to expand considerably both in its form and content. Each successive program attracts more local and international visitors, appealing to an increasingly wide range of specialists and lay audiences alike. Although the festival is usually a biennial event, a special edition was organized for 2007, partly in honor of Sibiu’s status as European Capital of Culture this year. It also came on the heels of the Astra Film Cinemateque series, “365 Windows on the World,” beginning on the first of January 2007, at both the Astra Film Studio / CNM Astra in Sibiu, and the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest, bringing award-winning films from the Astra archives and other international festivals to public audiences in Romania throughout the year.

This year’s festival, held between the 22nd and 28th of October, involved more than just a series of film screenings. Held in Sibiu’s *Casa de Cultura*, the multitude of activities connected to this weeklong event transformed the building’s old communist style interior into an interactive and multi-sensory space. The walls of the main lobby were lined with documentary photos from all corners of Transylvania, taken by photographers from around the world. The lobby also served as a stage where folk music and dance troupes from Romania, Hungary, Italy, and France could perform in the evenings, surrounded by tables stocked with all sorts of local varieties of wine and plum brandy to be sampled by the festival-goers. Seminar rooms around the building hosted media workshops and round table discussions on such topics as the “State of the Art of Documentary Film.” The festival’s café/bar offered a place to have a drink, meet up with colleagues, or read the Astra’s daily newspaper supplements, containing film reviews and interviews with directors, jury members, organizers, and participants. The “Video Bar,” housing a DVD library of all of the festival’s films, allowed you to catch anything you might have missed in the two screening halls throughout the week. Such a context formed the backdrop for this gathering of people of many ages, professions, and nationalities, who came to see the latest in Romanian and international documentaries and ethnographic films.

This year’s festival included 84 films in total, selected from some 800 submissions. More than half of these comprised the International, European, Romanian, and Student categories in the competition section. Those screened in the main theater were followed by a question and answer session with the director, if present, which often resulted in lively and animated discussions.

The rest of the films in the festival were shown as part of a series of special programs. A retrospective on Robert Connolly and Robin Anderson offered the rare opportunity to see their classic Highland Trilogy ethnographic documentaries from the 1980s and early '90s set in Papua New Guinea. The "My Transylvania" section contained an array of documentaries covering issues specific to contemporary experiences in Transylvania, such as cultural diversity, ethnic relations, labor migration, and post-communist transition. The "Transhumance, Shepherds and Film" section gave a broad selection of films on pastoralist experiences, beginning with Merian Cooper and Ernest Beaumont's classic *Grass: A Nation Battle for Life* (USA, 1925, 71 min), and including other films on such communities in Romania, Tibet, France, Scotland, and Italy. On the final day of the festival, the Transhumance section culminated in a special interactive program, with a festive gathering in a shepherding village outside Sibiu.

Another unique element to this year's AFF was the inclusion of films sections affiliated with the BBC and Arte, exploring the ways in which these television venues have covered issues in Central and Eastern Europe over the last two decades. The BBC section presented a sampling of journalistic documentaries by Melissa Llewelyn-Davies, Angus McQueen, and Pavel Pawlikowski. The Arte section also showed a range of films focusing on individual and personal experiences reflecting the broader social, cultural, and political realities of Eastern Europe.

Last but not least in the special programs was a section featuring Michael Yorke's work, screening some of the highlights from his career as an anthropologist and filmmaker. Yorke, who was present at the festival, initiated a very interesting discussion about the ways in which definitions of ethnographic film in the UK have changed over the years, drawing upon his experiences working in academia, at the BBC, and independently. In the 1970s, many anthropologists' films, including Yorke's own, were broadcast on mainstream television programs, such as the BBC's "Under the Sun" and Granada TV's "Disappearing Worlds" series. At that time, Yorke did not view such films as "truly" ethnographic because of the compromises they made in order to cater to mass audiences. Yet in recent years, he observed, these same films have been increasingly popular in anthropological film libraries, at ethnographic film festivals, and as teaching resources in anthropology departments. Though Yorke noted that he is delighted by this removal of previous barriers between academic and popular modes of filmic representation, he raised important questions about anthropology's relationship with the media, and its shifting approaches to visually interpreting its subject. Yorke's commentary was a welcome addition to the festival, particularly as it contained documentaries from directors with such a wide range of backgrounds, institutional affiliations, styles and approaches.

Because of the sheer quantity of films shown in such a short amount of time, it was obviously impossible for a visitor to see everything in the program, even when most of the films were screened again in the smaller theater. I will therefore only review the ones I managed to watch and that I feel are relevant to discussions within the field of visual anthropology. For a more detailed and comprehensive account of the program, jury members, filmmakers, and awards, see the festival website at: <http://www.astrafilm.ro/>

In many film festivals, student work often stands out as more original, innovative, and daring to

take risks that more conventional or established directors may not be motivated to do. Produced by a team from the 2007 Aristotle Film Workshop in Sibiu, Rastko Petrovic's *Independence* (Romania, 25 min) struck me as one of the most powerful films in the student category. The film enters deeply but unobtrusively into a few weeks in the life of Razvan, an adolescent boy living in a peripheral neighborhood of Sibiu with his father and sister, as his mother has gone off to work in Italy. Such a situation is increasingly common in Romania today; and although the filmmakers are not anthropologists, they succeed in exploring this serious social issue with an ethnographic sensitivity, without being overly didactic. Presenting us with everyday up-close scenes from Razvan's daily life, the film pieces together a portrait with the subtlety of a work of fiction. It does not resort to narration, interview, or voice-over, but rather lets the story unfold through the characters' everyday activities and interactions. *Independence* was awarded a special jury commendation for the Student section.

The two other winning films in the student section were also original in their subject matter and approach, departing both from classic ethnographic observational styles, as well as more commercialized, journalistic approaches. Chana Zalis's *The Unkosher Truth* (Israel, 35 min), awarded the National Center for Cinematography Student Prize, gives a very personal glimpse into the filmmaker's relationship with her own father, a Rabbi and General in the US Army, who does not approve of his daughter's "non-observant" lifestyle. Zalis turns the camera unflinchingly upon herself and her father, tracing her efforts to have him accept her choices in life, and exposing her unsuccessful attempts to tell him that she has a German, Gentile boyfriend. She takes Jean Rouch's idea of using the "camera as a catalyst" to an extreme, often pushing her father to discuss things he is clearly uneasy about, and showing herself in awkward and vulnerable situations. Her reflexive stance reveals both a commitment to communicating with her father, and a refusal to compromise her process of filming, and maintains an underlying integrity that is refreshing in such a personal documentary. Aside from the rather abrupt and ambiguous ending, the film holds together as a strong and intimate portrait of a complex father/daughter relationship.

Srdjan Keca's *After the War* (Serbia, 46 min), awarded the Sony Student Prize, uses long, patient camera takes to investigate the post-war traumas of ordinary inhabitants of a small Gorani village in the southwestern part of Serbia. Keca collages together images and impressions—a young boy walks to his father's gravesite on a remote hillside; a man tending cows reminisces about his involvement in the war; two women harvesting hay recollect a time when they witnessed a day of bombings from the field. The slightly unsettling but perceptive constellation of images evokes feelings of memory, loss and displacement, echoing the experiences of the inhabitants of this border village in an indirect but very visceral way. More concerned with using the visual medium to recreate the atmosphere of these shared cultural experiences than with overtly explaining or analyzing them, this film may lose some audiences because of its lack of contextualization. Yet such an approach suits this particular topic quite well, and Keca carries it out with a deliberation and skill that makes it stand apart from other films.

Another film addressing the personal impacts of a wider political situation, without generalizing or sensationalizing its subject, is Vanina Vignal's *Stella* (France, 77 min). *Stella*, a Romanian

woman who had been a factory worker before the 1989 revolution, came to live in a shantytown on the outskirts of Paris with her husband and her sister, and begs in the Metro in order to survive. As the film progresses, we gain an intimate and complex view of Stella's life that goes beyond predictable stereotypes. This is due partly to Vignal's decision to do all of the filming and sound recording on her own, and to the close relationships that developed from these one-on-one interactions over an extended period of time. Although Stella originally came to France to seek medical help for her husband, she still dreams about going back home to Romania. Particularly moving sequences are those showing the depth of her emotional connections to both her husband and her sister, and intimate shots of Stella looking through old photographs of her family and commenting on them. By focusing on the concrete contours of Stella's everyday life, her relationships, interactions, thoughts, memories, and hopes for the future, but also alluding to broader social and cultural forces, Vignal insightfully explores the implications of one individual struggling to make her way through the present period of Romanian post-communism.

In *Our Street* (France, 52 min), Marcin Latallo also traces the implications of economic and social change resulting from post-communist transition in Poland. The film follows the Furmanczyks family during a three-year period before, during and after Poland's entry into the EU. Across the street from their flat is a factory, which had employed members of their family for five generations, and is now being converted into one of the largest shopping and entertainment centers in Central Europe. As the renovations begin, the Furmanczyks experience changes in their daily lives as well: a baby is born, a husband goes to jail, a son looks for work, a grandmother reminisces about her happy days working in the factory, a father struggles to find his place amidst his changing political and cultural landscape. The film makes no explicit statement about whether these post-communist transformations are ultimately positive or negative, but rather shows the details of these public and private spheres in parallel development. *Our Street* won the Deventer Roemenie Foundation and Filmhuis de Keizer award for the European section.

An even longer-term filmic study of the contrasts between "East" and "West" is Jean-Luc Leon's 1994 documentary, *The Lapirovs Go West* (France, 86 min), screened as part of the Arte special program section. Covering a period of nearly 15 years in the lives of a Russian Jewish couple and their son, the film captures their experiences in Moscow, their process of immigrating to the US, and a brief visit to post-soviet Russia a decade later. The film witnesses their responses and adaptations to their drastically new environment in Los Angeles, exploring the different generational interpretations of the "American dream" with sensitivity and humor. It is a testament to the quality of the film that even a decade later, it still resonates with current realities and memories of post-communist experiences.

The last film with post-socialist themes that I want to mention is Tone Grotjord's *Prirechnyy: The Town That No Longer Exists* (Norway, 52 min), awarded the Romanian Public Television Prize for the International section. Prirechnyy, a northern Russian mining town created specifically for its local working population, was largely abandoned after the end of communism. Despite the fact that formal records have recently declared that this town officially no longer exists, a small group of mostly elderly, retired people has chosen to remain there. The film

follows the interactions and activities of four of these quirky and endearing characters, as they negotiate their relationships within and beyond their home community that has remained relatively distanced from the “outside” world. With impeccable camera work and editing, Grottfjord manages to capture the absurdity of the situation while preserving the respect and dignity of the protagonists in her film, and simultaneously avoids becoming overly sentimental or nostalgic about the end of the Soviet era.

Making Rain (Estonia/Norway/Mozambique, 57 min), by Liivo Niglas and Frode Storaas, serves as an example of true collaboration in ethnographic filmmaking. Working closely with Norwegian anthropologist Tore Saetersdal, the team documented an annual rainmaking ceremony in the Vumba Hills of Mozambique. While the film demonstrates and explains the various ritual components of this ceremony, it also uncovers various social subtexts surfacing throughout its enactment. As the film unfolds, we gain a deeper insight into the gender relations and political tensions existing between the region’s official male Chief and spiritual leader, and a local female spiritual medium. Awarded a Special Jury Commendation for the International section, the skilled camera work and careful scene selection raise it above the typical “anthropological research” film, presenting a well-structured narrative, and a nuanced look at its characters.

Itsushi Kawase’s *Room 11 Ethiopia Hotel* (Japan, 23 min) offers an original way of looking at the social issue of the lives of street children, as the filmmaker’s camera never leaves the inside of his hotel room in Gondar. Kawase succeeds in accessing multiple facets of the children’s daily lives, however, first by viewing them from his window above the street, then by inviting two of them inside and talking with them directly. He ends up fronting them the capital to start their own street-vending business, and films them as they come back at regular intervals to fill him in on their progress. The film becomes a venue for a kind of collaboration with the children, raising important issues about the level of intervention and interaction between anthropologist and subject, and about the extent of the researcher’s roles and responsibilities of advocacy within the field.

It would be impossible to end this review without mentioning the special projection of Martin Gruber’s *The Future of Visual Anthropology* (Germany, 15 min). Filmed in 2001 at the “Origins of Visual Anthropology—Putting the Past Together” conference in Gottingen, Germany, this document collages together interviews with important figures in the field, including Jean Rouch, Jay Ruby, Ian Dunlop, Paul Henley, Karl Heider, Howard Morphy, Peter Crawford, and Harald Prins. Topics discussed include issues of technology and new media’s influences upon the act of filming in the field, the theoretical implications of the increased usage of images in anthropological research, as well as the phenomenon of the growing number of institutions and universities involved in visual anthropology practices. While these issues are synthesized into a short, compact film, Gruber’s DVD also contains the raw footage of all the interviews he conducted, which makes it valuable as a tool for research and teaching purposes. The film gives its viewers some essential means for thinking about the implications of an event such as the AFF, and serves as an important reminder to the audience about its origins within the discipline of visual anthropology.

It is hard to believe that the Astra Film Festival started out fifteen years ago as an idealistic vision for creating a modest center for studying visual anthropology and documentary film. Thanks again to the festival's coordinators and volunteers, particularly Dumitru Budrala and Csilla Kato, for helping to keep the festival alive. Thanks also to all of the participating filmmakers, jury members, as well as members of local and international audiences coming from near and far to participate in this year's special edition. We are all looking forward to the next edition in 2009!

References:

Budrala, Dumitru. "The Astra Film Experiment (1991-1996)." *Martor: The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review*, No. 2, 2007: 132-136.